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ABSTRACT

All lessons in this unit of study are designed to introduce some of the basic elements of poetry (simile, metaphor, alliteration, sensory language, etc.) while exposing students to a realistic slice of Appalachian life. Appropriate grade levels and a time frame are suggested, and relevant Virginia Standards of Learning are outlined in the unit. Necessary materials are also cited, and teacher's notes are provided. The unit contains seven lessons (using seven poems): (1) "Fish Story"; (2) "A House of Readers"; (3) "Skydivers"; (4) "Winter Days"; (5) "The Brier Breathing"; (6) "The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions"; and (7) "The Trade." Lessons in the unit contain a procedure for the teacher to follow and extension activities. Also provided are assessment/evaluation ideas. (NKA)

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Teaching Selected Poems From Jim Wayne Miller's "The Brier Poems".

by Tammy Wood

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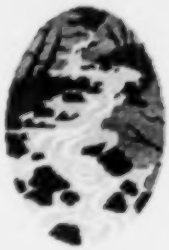
Teaching Selected Poems From Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems*



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Introduction:

All lessons in this unit are designed to introduce some of the basic elements of poetry (simile, metaphor, alliteration, sensory language, etc.) while exposing students to a realistic slice of Appalachian life. For many students, the recognizable and familiar themes and ideas of Miller's poems will encourage them to want to read more poetry instead of viewing poetry as something over their heads.

Grade Levels: 4 – 6

Subject: Poetry and Poetic Devices, Life in Appalachia

Time Frame: seven 45-minute periods (adjust time and number of periods based on needs of your class)

Relevant Virginia Standards of Learning:

English 4.6 The student will read a variety of poetry

- Describe the rhyme scheme (approximate, end, and internal)
- Identify the sensory words used and their effect on the reader
- Write rhymed, unrhymed, and patterned poetry

English 5.5 The student will read a variety of literary forms, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry

- Describe character development in fiction and poetry selections
- Describe the characteristics of free verse, rhymed, and patterned poetry
- Describe how author's choice of vocabulary and style contribute to the quality and enjoyment of selections

English 6.6 The student will read and write a variety of poetry

- Describe the visual images created by language
- Describe how word choice, speaker, and imagery elicit a response from the reader

- Compare and contrast plot and character development in narrative poems, short stories, and longer fiction selections

Materials:

One copy of ***The Brier Poems*** by Jim Wayne Miller published in 1997 by Gnomon Press, P. O. Box 475, Frankfort, Kentucky 40602 – ISBN 0-917788-62-1. Photocopies of "Fish Story," "A House of Readers," "Skydivers," Winter Days," "The Brier Breathing," "The Brier Losing Touch With His Traditions," and "The Trade."

Teacher's Notes:

It is important that you give the students photocopies of selected poems or read them the poems rather than giving them the entire book. Many of the poems in this work are not suitable for students at the elementary/middle school level. Please note that the following two poems contain words that may cause conflict in your particular school.

- In "The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions" the word "beer" appears
- In "The Trade" the word "bitch" (in reference to a female dog) appears

Lesson plans are given for poems in the order in which they appear in the book. This may or may not be the order in which you would choose to do them with your class. Please decide what works best for you and your students.

In some cases, I have given a synopsis of the poem or other information as I felt it might be helpful.

Lesson I – "Fish Story"

Synopsis of Poem: a comparison of kite flying and fishing; how children creatively compensate for not being able to do a specific activity when they want to do it

Procedures:

- Before reading the poem, have students tell you what they think the poem will be about based on the title.
- Have students read the poem aloud, noting that the poem tells a story.
- Discuss the differences or similarities in what students expected the poem to be about versus what it is actually about.
- Discuss the creativity of the children in the poem. Use the poem to introduce the concept of stanzas – have the students number the stanzas in the poem.
    - Have the students pay particular attention to the way Miller breaks his lines and stanzas – the end of a line or stanza does not necessarily signify the end of a sentence or the end of a thought.
- Write a class poem with several stanzas that tells a story.
- Introduce the concept of alliteration – the repeating of initial consonant sounds in a line of poetry.
    - Divide the class into groups and assign them a stanza.
    - Have each group work together to find and circle/underline/highlight all instances of

alliteration in their stanza.

- You might want to have the students use different colors to note alliteration with different letters in the same stanza – for example, in stanza 9, line 2, the alliteration of the "t" continues into line 3, but you also have alliteration of the "p" in line 3.

Enrichment:

What would the children in the poem be like? Write a paragraph or another poem describing them as you would imagine them to be.

Lesson 2: "A House of Readers"

Procedure:

- Introduce the concept of simile – a comparison of two things or ideas using like or as
- Give the students some of examples of similes such as
  - Her eyes were as gray as a cloudy day.
  - The spilled tube of glitter sparkled like colorful jewels on the wooden floor.
  - Note – I think it is very important to get students to use detail when writing similes. Using things like "The pillow was soft as a feather" is okay for a start, but students need to move beyond that so their writing will not sound trite and uninteresting. Lead them to write something like "My grandma's old pillow was as soft as ducks' feathers against my cheek." Take them as far as they are willing to go with it!
- Have the students come up with some similes of their own. Make a list on the board or on a large piece of paper that you can display for future reference.
- Read aloud "A House of Readers," having students listen to and enjoy the poem.
- Have the students share how they feel about the poem and about reading.
- Read the poem again, having students listen for, look for, and/or underline the similes in the poem.
- Talk about the similes. What is being compared to what? Do these comparisons affect the way the students respond to the poem? What would the poem be like without them?
- Write short class poems using similes.
- Have students write their own poems using similes.

Extension:

What is the house of readers being compared to? Why do you think the author chose to make this comparison? Write 2 or 3 paragraphs explaining your answer.

Lesson 3: "Skydivers"

Note:

Very good for discussing how to convey feelings in poetry, using imagery to help convey those feelings, and doing so in a fairly concise manner.

Procedure:

- Introduce the concept of imagery
  - Visual – can be seen
  - Tactile – something you can touch and feel
  - Imagery that involves other senses such as smell, taste, hearing
- Introduce the vocabulary words prone and corridor.
  - Students may look these words up and do definitions, use them in sentences, create word webs, or use them in any other creative vocabulary activity that you design.
- Have students read the poem aloud or listen as you read it for them.
- Discuss what students think the poem means.
  - What are the separate days compared to? How does this make you feel?
- Discuss what images the author uses to get his point across.
  - Are the images visual or do they call on other senses to understand them?
    - *Images are mostly visual, although some tactile images do occur such as the feel of the chair lift tipping and rising, feet swinging and dangling, floating in currents*
- Write a class poem using imagery to create a feeling.
- Write individual poems using imagery.

Extension:

Have students continue the poem. What happens as the skydivers touch down? Does each go his/her separate way or do they come back together?

Lesson 4: "Winter Days"

Note:

Use to continue exploration of imagery from Lesson 3 or use to introduce imagery before beginning Lesson 3. This one also makes a nice art connection.

Procedure:

- Introduce the vocabulary words ricocheted, quarry, and sycamore.
- Remind students of definitions of imagery. (Or introduce those definitions if using this lesson before Lesson 3.)
- Read the poem aloud to the students. The students should just listen and think about what the poem makes them see, hear, taste, feel, and smell.
- Have the students draw the scene being described in the poem. Display the pictures.
- Ask students
  - What might you hear in this poem? *Broom straw hissing, cattle, sounds of the river*
  - What might you smell in this poem? *Smells associated with cattle*
  - What might you feel in this poem? *Warmth of the sun, cold icicles*
  - What might you taste in this poem? *Cold, icicles*
  - What images do you see in this poem? *There will be many answers*
- Read the poem again.
- Ask the students what they like about it. Is it something they are familiar with or something they

know little about.
- Have the students write their own poems using different types of imagery.

Lesson 5: "The Brier Breathing"

Procedure:

- Introduce the term "brier" as defined by Jim Wayne Miller in *The Brier Poems*.
- Have students discuss the meaning of the term. What negative feelings do they have? Is there anything good about being a brier?
- Lead a discussion that gets the students thinking about imagery and dreams.
- Read "The Brier Breathing"
- Have the students identify imagery in the poem.
- Have the students think about the different types of breathing in the poem.
    - What events or feelings might students associate with the different types of breathings?
    - Does the poem leave the reader with a peaceful, satisfied feeling? Why or why not?
    - What kind of person do you think the Brier in this particular poem is?

Lesson 6: "The Brier Losing Touch with His Traditions"

Note:

This poem is not especially good for teaching poetic devices. However, it works well for teachers wanting to teach a little about what has happened to Appalachian people and can be extended to include anyone who has had to hide who they truly are in order to by accepted be others for what others perceive them to be.

Procedure:

- Introduce the vocabulary lathe, brier, and traditions. Have students work with these words in whatever manner you choose to familiarize themselves with the definitions.
- Read the poem aloud to or with the students.
- Have the students read the poem silently.
- Discussion Questions
    - What has happened to the "brier" in this poem?
    - How does he feel?
    - How did the "people up North" think that the Brier should make his chairs?
    - Does technology necessarily mean we are losing our traditions? Could technology help us start new traditions?
    - When do you think the Brier was happiest – when he was being himself or when he was being what the "people up North" wanted him to be? Why?

Extension:

Write a poem, story, or paragraph about a time that you could not be yourself? What put you in this

situation? How did it make you feel? What can we do to allow people to be themselves? Share with the class if appropriate.

Lesson 7: "The Trade"

Note:

Again, this poem is not particularly helpful with poetic devices. There is some nice imagery that you can pull out with the students. However, it is a wonderful slice of live poem that many students can understand and will enjoy reading.

Procedure:

- Introduce the vocabulary words baying, clamor, and cove. Have the students work with the words in whatever way you choose so that they can be familiar with their meanings.
- Lead a discussion about age differences. Some things to ask or think about might be
  - What memories do you have of your grandparents or another older person that you may know? Are they, good, bad, scary memories for you?
  - How are you different from older people?
  - Do you have anything of value to offer to older people? Do they have anything of value to offer you?
- Read "The Trade."
- Discuss the relationship of the grandfather and the grandson.
- What was the trade?

Evaluation/Assessment Ideas:

- Active participation in class and group discussions.
- Puts forth effort on poetry writing assignments.
- Passes teacher designed tests and quizzes on poetic devices, vocabulary, etc. with a percentage that is in line with school system or state standards.

If you use these lesson plans, have comments, or ideas please contact me at tamwood@swva.net. I welcome your thoughts.

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